

Ten Canoes as a communist film

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ABSTRACT

This essay thinks through the populist Marxism of Bertolt Brecht, and more specifically his courtroom challenge to the film industry, in order to interpret the Australian film *Ten Canoes* as a communist film. The idea of communism has recently been proposed by French philosopher Alain Badiou as a way of naming projects that are not only anti-capitalist, but that also suggest alternative modes of organisation. *Ten Canoes* actualises Brecht's ideas about what a collective filmmaking process might consist of, and more significantly what it might look like. The stilted acting, multiple storylines and structure of the fable that Brecht employed in his theatre productions are also visible in *Ten Canoes*, forms that resulted from a filmmaking process that involved extensive consultation with a remote Australian Aboriginal community. Its members made decisions about the film's story, script and casting. This coincidence between a German theatre director's ideas and twenty-first-century cinema points to a coincidence of aesthetics and politics, to which this essay gives the name communist.

Recently, public intellectuals in Europe have revived the idea of communism as a way of thinking through, and proposing alternatives to, a crisis-ridden global capitalism. The reintroduction of communism to the discourse of the West can be dated to a series of papers by Žižek (2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d, 2002e) on Vladimir Lenin in the early 2000s, but became the focus of a more widespread discussion after Alain Badiou's paper on the 2007 French election, 'The Communist Hypothesis' (2008). Badiou reclaims communism as 'the proposition that the subordination of labour to the dominant class is not inevitable – within the ideological sphere' (37). Communism is a way of turning contemporary cultural and political critique into an effective historical actor, of having it stand for something more than critique itself. For Peter Hallward, writing in a subsequent volume that takes up Badiou's idea, communism has the advantage of not being simply anti-capitalist, as current protest movements tend to be, nor is it the watered-down socialism represented by democratic parties. Instead, communism invites a reckless speculation on alternative modes of being (Hallward 2010, 111–113). What would it mean to call a film, and more particularly *Ten Canoes* (de Heer and Djigirr 2006) a communist film? *Ten Canoes* is renowned for the difference of its mode of production (Davis 2007; Riphagen 2008; Rutherford 2013). As a collaboration between the established Australian



independent filmmaker Rolf de Heer and the people of Ramingining, an Aboriginal community in northern Australia, it represents an alternative to purely commercial filmmaking. This is not, however, the party communism of much of the twentieth century.¹ This is instead a communism for the twenty-first century, without a party, that seeks to name co-operative tendencies within capitalism in order to illuminate alternatives to the dominant economic order. In this sense, *Ten Canoes* is a communist film as it illuminates an alternative mode of production, but one that must necessarily take place within capitalism itself.

In the writings of Badiou, Zizek and others, the return to communism entails a return to major figures of Marxist theory such as Hegel, Lenin and Marx himself. Lenin famously thought that cinema was the most significant of the arts because of its populous nature, and appointed his wife, N.K. Krupskaia, to take charge of the first film organisation within the Soviet government. While Lenin and Krupskaia saw the possibilities for cinema within communism, the most significant communist thinker about film's revolutionary potential within capitalist societies was Bertolt Brecht. Choosing to work in Eastern Europe rather than in the West at the advent of the cold war, Brecht proposed that collectively made films would exhibit certain formal features (Frow 1984).² More, the collaborative nature of cinematic production lent itself to collective and therefore communist modes of production. While Brecht and the people of Ramingining are from radically different backgrounds and historical periods, coincident features of these production processes and the aesthetics that result from them point the way to a better understanding of different modes of cinematic production. As Brecht proposed that cinema production was suited to collective practices, so de Heer has persistently argued that when directing *Ten Canoes* he gave as much control to the Ramingining community as possible. In interviews the filmmaker claims that 'They're telling the story, largely, and I'm the mechanism by which they can' (cited in Starrs 2013, n.p.). Or that 'I tried as hard as possible not to have any voice at all' (cited in Rutherford 2013, 146). The complexity of de Heer's position is most evident when it comes to the script, that he wrote while thinking he was writing what the community wanted him to write. On the scriptwriting of *Ten Canoes*, de Heer says 'I didn't impose, I served' (cited in Rutherford 2013, 144). So it is that de Heer adopts a directorial 'passive masculinity' (Starrs 2013, n.p.). In his book on de Heer, Bruno Starrs argues that this passivity distinguishes his filmmaking from the aggressive masculinity of a Hollywood-based mainstream (2013, n.p.).

The complexity of the collaborative process is represented by the documentary on the making of the film, *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes* (de Heer, Nehme, and Reynolds 2006). Here, de Heer tells of a series of cross-cultural misunderstandings and local politics taking place on set, around issues of nudity, gender, casting by kinship group, language and cultural difference. The situation recontextualises Brecht's ideas about collective filmmaking in the twenty-first century. For while discourses around communism in the twentieth century took place around political ideas, such ideas are less relevant in the twenty-first century than issues around cultural difference. Collaborations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists have long highlighted the complexity and difficulty of the cross-cultural terrain (Rey 2014). Collaborative projects are often constituted by friction and misunderstanding, and have been critiqued for being inequitable as they take place in an inequitable society (Jones 2014). Local criticisms of cross-cultural collaboration are echoed by an international debate over the nature of artistic collaboration. Bishop (2004, 2012) has drawn on the post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to

argue that collaboration- and community-based art practices are inscribed into socially antagonistic world. It is certainly possible to read *Ten Canoes* in this way, especially as it is represented by *The Balanda and the Bark Canoes*. In one scene of this documentary, de Heer, true to ethnographic photographs of swamp canoes being made, instructs the Arnhem Land men to make a canoe this way and not that way. ‘To interfere seems outrageous’, he says, yet he does it to stay true to the traditions of the community themselves (de Heer, Nehme, and Reynolds 2006). Anne Rutherford emphasises that de Heer’s ethnographic sources for *Ten Canoes* included not only the historical photographs that the film famously brings to life, but L.W. Warner’s anthropological study of the region from the 1930s (Rutherford 2013, 140). As such, the film can be situated within an ‘intercultural membrane’ of long duration in Arnhem Land, that extends through a colonial history of the area. This is a history that includes antagonism, such as the so-called Black War of the early twentieth century and the legal campaign against the bauxite mine in the 1960s (Corn and Gumbula 2003; Dewar 1992). As Johnny (Pascoe) Buniyira says at a public meeting about the film, ‘We don’t want the mining company, we want the acting’ (de Heer, Nehme, and Reynolds 2006). Or in Michael Dawu’s words:

We decided to make this film for our future. Because we lost our culture and traditions. This balanda brought these photos. He said, ‘Hey, Yolgnu. You better stand up.’ This is our memory for our people. So we stood up. (de Heer, Nehme, and Reynolds 2006)

For de Heer ‘in strengthening their culture they’ve also strengthened themselves’ (de Heer, Nehme, and Reynolds 2006).

Eric Michaels’s essay, ‘Aboriginal Content: Who’s Got It – Who Needs It?’ (1991) addresses this differences in the way media functions within and without remote Aboriginal communities. Michaels emphasises the way that Warlpiri TV at Yeendumu in the Central Desert is produced out of a negotiation between himself and Aboriginal producers. If left to their own devices, he says that these local producers would prefer to be making Bruce-Lee-style *kung-fu* movies in the Walpiri language (292). However, Michaels tells them that, apart from the logistical problems, ‘we need to stay with the things that only Walpiri people can do, and therefore do best’ (292). So it is that Aboriginal television is produced out of a cross-cultural and collaborative situation, out of a negotiation that is partly antagonistic between Michaels and the Walpiri producers. Sensitive to the way in which such collaborations bring about different formal features, Michaels describes television at Yeendumu as a kind of ‘Brechtian Theatre’ (291). He describes its difference from mainstream Australian, professional television:

Jupurrurla, one of the Warlpiri TV producers with whom I was most closely associated, is a big Reggae fan, so for his schedule he begins with Reggae music and focuses the camera on his Bob Marley T-shirt draped over a chair. After a while he refocuses the camera on the compere’s desk, walks around and into the shot, announces the schedule and any news, then walks out of the shot, turns off the camera and switches on the VCR. This procedure is repeated for any tape. (292)

So it is that Michaels goes on to ask: ‘Critics of mass media, who are not simply elitist critics of proletariat culture, may in fact be asking: “Can there be a Brechtian mass medium?” Can alienation and critical distance be preserved without losing the audience?’ (292). Alienation is a Brechtian term, one that describes the alienation of an audience that becomes aware of their own spectatorship, through formal devices in theatre that make



actors and audience alike conscious of their theatrical, contrived situation. Brecht wanted to invoke self-awareness and thought in the audience, rather than affective emotional empathy. In Brecht's own words, 'A representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognise its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar' (Brecht 1964, 192).

While the conditions of production for *Walpiri TV* and *Ten Canoes* are as different as tropical Arnhem Land from the Central Desert of Australia, as one language and cosmology from another, alienation effects are at work in the latter film. The voice of The Storyteller (David Gulpilil) works to defuse the immersive effects of cinema. He begins the film by saying, 'Once upon a time, long, long ago ...' before bursting into laughter. In Brecht's words, the performer's aim is 'not to put the audience in a trance' (Brecht 1964, 193). Here, The Storyteller makes us aware of the processes of representation that work to build the expectations of an audience, expectations that he quickly punctures. The film unfolds as a representation thrice removed, as a story within a story within a story, as The Storyteller tells a story from around the time of colonisation, whose characters tell another story from older times. One story is performed by the actors who are acting in another story from historical times, so that we are aware that these are actors first, and characters second. The actors play themselves playing roles across time, as they perform a story that exceeds their own lifetime, being at once a part of the drama and not a part of it. As they switch roles, the audience comes to be aware of both the actor and the character the actors play, short-circuiting the empathy by which a spectator of drama usually come to identify with a character. In other scenes, these actors take control over the fate of the film and its narrative. As the ancients are deciding what happened to the missing character of Nowalingu (Frances Djulibing), they visualise the possibilities. These encompass everything from kidnapping to being eaten by a crocodile. Eventually, and between them, they agree that she has run off. Djulibing plays out these possibilities in a series of scenes that illustrate Nowalingu's potential fate, but that tie her to none. She is alienated from her character's destiny, from her place in some overarching cinematic logic. Thus, the film's narrative is placed into the hands of the actors, on-screen. The men's discussions are reminiscent of the process of scriptwriting itself, in which different narrative options are put forth before being rejected or accepted. At the end of the film, The Storyteller informs us that this is 'not your story, it's my story', ensuring that we do not run off with ourselves, and that the community retains ownership of the film's content. *Ten Canoes* signals its own storytelling devices, developing cognitive distance between viewer and performers, to emphasise the differences between the insider and outsider meanings of the film.

Such alienations are certainly Brechtian, but how revolutionary are they? The formal features that Brecht thought of as part of a revolutionary struggle for communism were not revolutionary for other Marxists who were contemporaneous with Brecht. Theodor Adorno compared Brecht to the comic filmmaker Charlie Chaplin, both of whom he saw as playing on the margins of the capitalist monstrosity with comic fables. For Adorno, Brecht's aesthetic ideas repeat the ineffective gesture of Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*, in which his character hits a row of Nazi stormtroopers over the head with a frying pan (Adorno 1992, 82–87). This scene presents cinema's own ineffective role in confronting the Nazi threat, trivialising a serious historical situation, in a move that ultimately only serves the interests of a bourgeoisie audience looking for distraction from war. Adorno's critique may well be extended to the audience of *Ten Canoes*, that finds within the films of

other cultures their own morality but in fable form. For instead of showing the actual situation of Ramingining today, with its shortage of housing, acute unemployment, alcohol and drug addictions, *Ten Canoes* sets itself in the past, in archaic times. The film has been critiqued for avoiding issues of contemporary relevance, instead showing a romantic, extinct version of Indigenous life (Riphagen 2008). Melinda Hinkson has critiqued Michaels's anti-capitalism along the same lines, arguing that he relied on a model of cultural maintenance whilst theorising the Walpiri, using new media to extend traditionalism in a remote Aboriginal society (Hinkson 2002, 205–206). Her fieldwork at Yeendumu, tracing the development of media after Michaels's time there, shows the extensive socialisation of the Walpiri through new media, rather than a return to tradition through it. It is easy to read de Heer through the same lens, as he brings ethnographic photographs back to a community that he sees as having lost their traditions. At the beginning of *Balandia and the Bark Canoes*, de Heer sets the scene by telling us that 'not much happens in Raman-gining apart from a slow and inevitable loss of the old ways, but there is very little to replace what is being lost'. By the end of the documentary, he tells us that the film has 'brought back from a far away place some of their culture' (de Heer, Nehme, and Reynolds 2006).

Rutherford warns against the danger of a traditionalist reading of *Ten Canoes*. In her essay on the film, she criticises Starrs twice for his description of *Ten Canoes* as a 'dream-time legend' (Starrs in Rutherford 138). The ethnographic dimensions of the film may however have been a reason for the success of *Ten Canoes* among independent cinema goers. Independent film is both resistant and complicit with the film industry's core formulas for cinematic production, distribution and exhibition (O'Regan 1996, 113). Its formal innovations and Indigenous content make it a part of a global circuit of 'world cinema', that encompasses third- and fourth-world cinema (O'Regan 1996, 129). That *Ten Canoes* is in an Indigenous language, and presents a story about traditional Indigenous lives, lends itself to this international market, in which the particularity of local cultures assert themselves in a global marketplace. However, Rutherford insists that the film is at best neo-traditional, produced out of a collaboration rather than being essentially Indigenous. Louise Hamby has also made arguments for a neo-traditional *Ten Canoes*, as the simulation of the Thomson photographs and the building of traditional canoes by local actors re-conceptualises tradition as a contemporary invention (Hamby 2007, 144–145). In an interview with Rutherford, de Heer recalls that he:

realized *anything* is allowed to happen in the mythical past. That provided the key ... How do tell the same story in a different way that we can achieve. [...] that's when [I found] solutions like somebody talking to camera, that would replace a large scene that was very difficult to stage. (2013, 145)

So it is that *Ten Canoes* is not traditional in an insider sense, as the filming of *Ten Canoes* was something new, and could not have taken place without the cross-cultural negotiation that spurred changes in the film's structure and form. Indeed, the film reconceptualised what the community understand as 'Thomson Times', the time of the photographs upon which the film was based (Hamby 2007). Similarly, Michaels argues that the distinct adaptation of media in Yeendumu suited the purposes of the community, rather than the purposes of the assimilationist agenda of greater Australia. The participation of local people in both places was predicated on these kinds of local conceptualisation.



If such projects are not precisely anti-capitalist, they are at least communist insofar as they illuminate modes of organisation that are nascent within capitalism. Brecht identified this idea of an emergent collectivity within the production process. In 1930, Brecht took a German film company to court over its adaptation of his play, *The Threepenny Opera*. He had signed an agreement that would give him creative veto over the final form of the film, but the court ruled this agreement was not as important as the interests of the investors who had put up so much capital to produce the film. In simple terms, capital won out over art, and it turns out that this is what Brecht expected to happen, that he took the company to court not to win but to illustrate that this new medium of film represented changes to the conditions for artistic production generally (Frow 1984, 3–4). Individual producers no longer ruled the kingdom of their own work. Instead the corporation, given rights in law, becomes the creative agent of the late twentieth century and beyond. At first glance, this demotion of the artist does not look good for cinema, as art is itself demoted to the place of a specialist worker in the production process. While capitalism is responsible for this shift, and for what appears to be a degradation of artistic vision, Brecht points out that this is also a sign of the fall of bourgeoisie values (Frow 1984, 10). The bourgeoisie developed a theory of aesthetics that promoted the idea of the artist as an individual creator, and of an artistic interiority from which art springs unbidden. Instead, in cinema, art becomes a part of a set of exterior relations that is more appropriate to its complex production process. Brecht thought of this as a part of the historical development of capitalism, and one that would also bring about its demise. Once capitalism had dismantled the artist as individual creator, albeit through exploitation, it would be easier to actualise the kind of collective production practices he envisaged taking place in communist society and beyond. Brecht speculates on the relationship between capital and art when he writes that:

the recasting of spiritual values into commodities ... is a progressive process with which one can only concur, provided that progress is thought as a process, not an achieved state, and therefore that the stage of the commodity is seen as a stage that can be overcome by further progress. (cited in Frow 1984, 21)

Hence while in Brecht's time the art of film is lost to capital, this is but one step in a process of desubjectivisation that will eventually democratise the cinema form in a properly communist society. Meanwhile, film is torn between two imperatives. On the one hand, the directorial model of filmmaking wants to consider the film a work of art, created by an individual's vision. On the other, it wants to protect its investment. As a result, filmmaking in capitalist society is doomed to fluctuate between its individualistic, bourgeoisie values and investment capital itself. Yet Brecht saw the potential for both to be overturned by cinema. He thought that this process offered the chance to collectivise works of art, to make films out of creative collaboration, and to point the way out of a class-based society.

It is all too easy to idealise cross-cultural collaboration, and to overlook the inequalities that make a film such as *Ten Canoes* possible. The collaboration, with a full production crew, was enabled by the community's lack of capacity to make their own feature films as much as it was by de Heer's own capacity to do so. Yet there is also a danger in not recognising the politics at work in the negotiation that enabled the film to take place, in not giving this collaborative project a name that functions beyond its particular cross-cultural context. For Badiou (2008), communism is the name for the liberation of human

subjects and societies from a ruling class, who in this case are the settlers who have been engaged in colonising the country called Australia. Communism gives a name to alternatives to this form of structural and systemic oppression. In cinema, the corporate mode of filmmaking stands for the logic of the ruling class, for the ideological apparatus of a world system of capitalism. *Ten Canoes* illuminates an alternative to this kind of filmmaking, to a corporate mode of filmmaking vexed by the contradictions of capitalism. This contradiction lies in the conflict between the directorial, artistic vision and the demands of investors that the film appeal to a mass market, that it be created as a commodity rather than as a work of art. As Brecht anticipated, other kinds of films would be nascent within capitalism, as filmmakers are able to exploit the collaborative potential of cinema albeit within a greater situation of oppression. To name *Ten Canoes* a communist film is to bring the critical potential of such differences to bear, to name cross-cultural and collaborative practices that represent at least in part an alternative to capitalist cultural production.

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Notes

1. In Australia, this was represented by the now defunct Communist Party of Australia, which supported the Aboriginal struggle for citizenship, equal pay and land rights (Boughton 2001).
2. My reading of Brecht relies on Frow (1984), who gives a detailed account of Brecht's German text, 'The Threepenny Lawsuit'. For more information on Brecht's relation to cinema, see Giles (1997).

Notes on contributor

Darren Jorgensen lectures in art history at the University of Western Australia. His recent book, co-authored with David Brooks, is *The Wanarn Painters of Place and Time: Old Age Travels in the Tjukurrrpa* (UWA Publishing, 2015).

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